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ABSTRACT

The current emphasis on the economic and educational benefits of reform in second language education is persuasive and important but must be pursued cautiously. While the reform movement can increase the number and length of language programs being offered in the schools, it does not assure the quality of instruction offered, which deserves similar attention. Certain common assumptions must be laid aside, such as that: teaching alone is at fault for inadequate second language learning outcomes; a two-year high school language course sequence will lead to a meaningful level of language proficiency; in order to make time for language instruction, time must be taken away from something else; the best and brightest students are always drawn away from language study; second language study is a frill, ancillary to the essential curriculum; and language study belongs in advanced studies but not general studies. Quantity and quality in instruction are reciprocal, not separate, issues. Language study has many purposes, immediate practical benefits, and lasting values, all of which should be considered in assigning its place in the curriculum. (MSE)

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THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE IN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION: ISSUES OF QUALITY AND QUANTITY

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THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE IN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION: ISSUES OF QUALITY AND QUANTITY

Education Reform: The Context for Improvement in Language Instruction

More than interested observers, many of us are participants, even initiators of change in education. It is a given that current education reform, both the first wave begun in 1985 and the second wave underway in 1987-88, seeks to promote those changes in education seen as both needed and desirable. In this article, I will examine both needed and desirable goals for language instruction in current education reform, together with the issues of quantity and quality in language instruction that must be addressed in the process. Relying as much on good common sense as on research and relevant statistics, I also want to make explicit and subject to critical examination some of the assumptions underlying current practice in second language instruction.

Pragmatic Value: Education and the Economy. From a pragmatic viewpoint, speaking another language can be quite valuable. Some people engaging in international trade have had that experience, as have others engaged in national defense, research, and a range of other endeavors. It seemed to me some time ago, as proposals for education reform were being advanced, that language studies sustained greatest attention when discussions centered on their role in economic development. Therefore, for the last four

years I have written articles and talked about the essential role and accelerating demand for language proficiencies in interconnected state, national, and world economies, supplying statistics on volume of trade and on jobs and other economic information - information that may be used to good effect to illustrate the pragmatic value of language study.[1] The theme of the connection between education and the economy continues to underlie even the second wave of education reform, as we can gather from the October 1986 issue of State Policy Reports. This connection may be more tenuous than pervasive, but I think that making the connection has great value in public persuasion and policy formation.

First, it should be kept in mind that focusing on the pragmatic dimension of language study in a public policy context does not imply losing sight of the educational benefits. On the contrary, I will argue a little later the point that language study is properly considered first and foremost an essential part of any meaningful concept of basic education. The new policy on second language and international studies adopted last year by the Illinois State Board of Education addresses both the practical and educational importance of such studies.[2]

Second, there are many actors in the formation of public policy, and each group carries different weight. Some public actors, like State Boards of Education, can be expected to be interested in educational considerations; but private actors, like the business community, proceed from a pragmatic orientation. Decision-makers in government, like state legislatures who

enact laws and provide funding for education, tend to consider the differential weight of opinion of a variety of actors. In a pragmatic society oriented toward economic concerns, I expect the business community to carry great weight in policy decisions. In his revealing and stimulating book, Goals for Mankind: New Horizons of Global Community, Ervin Laszlo[3] found national policies in the United States to be highly influenced by economic interests, as the business community carried an estimated 50% of the weight in decision-making on national policies while the influence of such actors as scientists and writers levitated at less than 10%. Consequently, it only seems to make good sense to use practical, economic arguments when addressing the business community, who, if persuaded, have a considerably stronger voice in public policy formation. Stressing the connection between education and the economy, between language study and international trade can therefore be quite productive in public persuasion and policy formation.

In Illinois, after having informed himself of the importance of language and international studies for the state economy, Lieutenant Governor Ryan has given a series of speeches in strong support of language studies. He has repeatedly expressed his belief that the future economic strength of Illinois, especially in international trade, rests on "our foreign language competence and our understanding of other cultures." Senator Simon of Illinois, long a supporter of language studies, thought that the Lieutenant Governor made such good sense that he entered the

entire speech into the Congressional Record and urged his colleagues in the U.S. Senate to read it with care.[4]

More than that, in Spring 1987 Lieutenant Governor Ryan introduced in the Illinois legislature a series of bills aimed at emphasizing and improving foreign language studies. At the same time he called for funding for the improvements in language programs recommended in the policy report of the Illinois State Board of Education.

Thus, the emphasis on economic and educational performance in the current education reform movement can bring clear advantages; nevertheless, I would also counsel caution. The caution relates most particularly to issues of quality; the immediate advantages address issues of quantity. That is, while the reform movement has the potential of increasing the number and length of language programs being offered in the schools, attention must at the same time be given to the quality of instruction offered.

Time in the Curriculum: Issues of Quantity in Language Programs

Let me begin with some points about the quantity of second language instruction, which should naturally lead to a discussion of the quality of that quantity - that is, not only the question of how much language instruction, but also how good in light of what goals. I will challenge some assumptions along the way.

Time for Teaching and Learning. First, there is a pervasive and persistent assumption that teaching is at fault for inade-

quate second language learning outcomes. A former Assistant Secretary of Education, as late as December 1986, was quoted as stating it this way: "We're not very good at teaching languages. Students take the courses, but they don't come out talking the languages."

The assumption that teaching alone is at fault is a fallacy. Like everything else, teaching can of course be improved. But the problem is fundamentally administrative. Too little instruction is generally offered too late to too few students. The Illinois State Board of Education policy report concluded from available course and enrollment information that, "although second language instruction is best offered early and continued in a long sequence to provide the opportunity to achieve usable proficiency, Illinois public schools, in general, do not offer second language instruction in appropriate grade levels and sequences." A recent State Board of Education survey of public elementary schools in Illinois confirmed the report's initial finding that comparatively few elementary schools offer language instruction at all, so that fewer than 4% of Illinois children in public schools, K-8, have access to a year-long program. Most students begin language study in high school and do not continue beyond the second year. Illinois figures on course offerings and enrollments from the State Board of Education policy report show that most students start language study as freshmen in high school and do not continue these studies beyond the second year, so that very few students in the state's public schools have an

opportunity to develop a usable level of proficiency.[5]

Perhaps after reading the Illinois State Board report, the Department of Education in Washington, in its 1986 publication What Works: Research About Teaching and Learning, declared: "The best way to learn a foreign language in school is to start early and to study it intensively over many years." Yet, state and national enrollment figures confirm this two-year convention, so that in most states of the nation few students have the opportunity to start early and study for the necessary number of years that would lead to meaningful and usable proficiency levels.

The two-year convention means that a student has 240 contact hours of second language instruction while having had 3,480 contact hours in the grades 1-12 sequence of language arts, a ratio of first to second language learning opportunity of about 14:1. On the basis of what we know about the process of language acquisition and the length of time required to achieve realistic goals in any skill, we can say that it is not a reasonable expectation that a two-year language sequence (with 240 contact hours) should lead to a meaningful level of proficiency. The evidence challenges the two-year convention and reveals it as unreasonable.

Given the evidence of nearly nonexistent language programs starting early and continuing in a coherent sequence, it is patently unreasonable to hold teachers alone accountable for unattained proficiency.

The point about such unreasonable assumptions and expectations about issues of quantity that affect quality bears repeat-

ing as long as the assumption persists that inadequate learning outcomes are due to problems in teaching rather than in program administration. Can we expect more than one-year or two-year high school programs as long as goals for student achievement included in education reform, according to the October 1986 State Policy Reports, are no more than that "college-bound students should have been exposed to a foreign language"? Exposed! The problematic policy implication of this unfortunate word choice is that few if any language and culture proficiencies are expected - even of college-bound students.

Available Time: Opportunity to Learn. Still, does language instruction make the most of time available at present? Little time is generally made available in the curriculum of most schools today for programs that start early and continue in a long sequence. I will return to the question of time in the curriculum in a moment. What about time available in the classroom? Perhaps because students generally do not attain a meaningful level of proficiency after two years of high school study, there is an assumption that language teaching is inefficient - in the sense that learning outcomes could be improved through better use of available time in the classroom.

This assumption does not hold up in light of studies of the use of instructional time. Instructional time is defined as the proportion of time allocated for academic activities usually devoted to instruction, as opposed to such noninstructional activities as taking attendance or distributing materials. This

proportion varies from 63% to 89%, depending on school, classroom, level of education and subject. In his study of schooling in the United States, John Goodlad[6] found that language instruction had the highest proportion of instructional time of any subject at the high school level: 83% of class time was spent on instruction - compared to 73% for English. This means that among all subjects, language teachers on average are most efficient in their management of available classroom time for instruction, thus providing students with a quantitatively maximum opportunity to learn.

Qualitatively, language teachers face the unique challenge of creating a classroom setting that approximates a natural setting. The immersion approach to language instruction probably comes closest to a such a natural setting, and not surprisingly students tend to emerge with meaningful levels of proficiency from such instruction. I will address the issue of quality associated with the challenge of approximating a natural setting in a moment.

So there is some evidence that language teachers, on average, manage available classroom time very efficiently for instruction. But how can more time be made available in the curriculum? There is an assumption that, to make time for language instruction, time must be taken away from something else. That assumption is proven a fallacy by available evidence, and it should not stand in the way of making language instruction available to our students.

First, we have the evidence of schools that have already managed to schedule such instruction, both in the United States and in other countries.

Second, there is John Goodlad's evidence of the lack of good management of instructional time in many schools. Time available for instruction in a school is eroded by announcements, assemblies, taking attendance, and other noninstructional activities. Simply managing time available for instruction more efficiently, Goodlad concluded, would on average provide several additional hours per week. Therefore, Goodlad argues, the debate over which school subjects are basic is futile since "we can have all the major ones without sacrificing anybody's definition of basics."

In short, the evidence reveals as fallacies the assumptions about time: that there is insufficient time in the curriculum for language studies and that language teachers generally do not make efficient use of time available for instruction.

The Quality Basis of Educational Performance: Issues of Quality in Language Programs and Instruction

Issues of quantity at some point are transformed into issues of quality. The two are not neatly separated; there are many reciprocal implications.

The Best and the Brightest. There is an assumption about language teachers, or those preparing to be language teachers, that should be challenged. The assumption is that when students

choose a college curriculum leading to a profession, such as psychology, engineering, or teaching, the best and the brightest go where the financial rewards are: business, engineering, law, medicine. That assumption is incorrect, for while greater numbers of students are attracted to college majors leading to the most lucrative professions, they are not necessarily the best and the brightest. Available data show that 20%, or 1 in 5 graduating high school seniors intend to major in business while 0.5%, or 1 in 200 intend to major in languages. But while the business seniors come out with a SAT Verbal mean of 436, the language seniors had an average score of 507 - an impressive difference of 71 points.[7] While these SAT scores are only one indicator of academic performance, they do challenge the assumption that students intending to pursue a language major in college are not as bright as those who go where the money is.

Issues in Teacher Preparation. If the students just mentioned who intend to pursue a language major in college are indeed comparatively quite capable in matters academic and verbal, what opportunities are offered them in their chosen college curriculum? And what expectations about their levels of performance at graduation do we hold?

Until recently, state law in Illinois required no more than a teaching certificate and 20 semester hours of a language to teach that language. Universities offered beginning and intermediate language courses as well as conversation and literature courses. In this progression of courses from beginning to ad-

vanced, there is a progressive increase in the proportional use of the second language as language of instruction. Still, language instruction in the college classroom, no less than in the high school and elementary school classroom, attempts to create a setting that approximates a natural setting. Even with the aid of language laboratories, computers, videotapes, shortwave radio, and satellite TV reception, this remains a challenge. So year-abroad programs have been incorporated into the curriculum at some universities. There are some fine programs, offering study at excellent universities abroad for a year, comparable in cost to study at the home university. Such studies go well beyond the 20 semester hours mentioned earlier, and they offer an opportunity for an exponential increase in knowledge and skills.

Such opportunities are not available to all students preparing for a career teaching languages. Yet such immersion experiences are necessary - and probably uniquely so - for languages among all subjects of the curriculum, not only as a preservice, but also an inservice activity. Once teachers are in the classroom, such immersion experiences need to be repeated periodically. A language not used continuously in settings with high levels of proficiency is subject to attrition. Yet current administrative practice seems to operate under the indifferent assumption that language skills are static over time, for there are no institutional provisions generally to support experiences abroad for language teachers. Is it fair to ask language teachers themselves to subsidize financially learning experiences

that will benefit the school district or the university where they teach?

The students in that school district or university will benefit. Administrative and financial provisions for such preservice and inservice experiences for language teachers must be made an integral and administratively controllable part of quality instruction.

Fundamental Questions of Quality. Speaking about increasing demand for language courses, Senator Paul Simon was quoted by the N.Y. Times News Service in December 1986 as saying: "The question now is, are we going to provide the quality we need?" This probing for quality continues. In its Report on the Humanities in the Nation's Public Schools just issued in fall 1987, the National Endowment for the Humanities is of the opinion that, "for the humanities generally, the challenge is not quantity but quality." The report addresses the question of language studies in the humanities curriculum extensively and recommends that "language study should start in grade school and continue through high school. From the beginning, it should teach students the history, literature and thought of other nations."

Another issue of quality concerns the place of language studies in the curriculum. There are two related assumptions about that. One is that the study of a second language is a frill; that is, that such studies are ancillary to the essential curriculum (perhaps as ancillary as knowledge about the shift from the Copernican to the Newtonian and later the Bergsonian

view of universe?). A related assumption is that language study is part of advanced studies, but not necessarily part of general studies. That assumption seems to underlie the perception of a large part of the American public. According to the Gallup Poll released in September 1987, 56% of respondents would require every college-bound high school student to take a second language but only 20% would insist on that for high school students generally. But language studies, I believe, should have neither advanced nor frill status in the curriculum. They must be considered an essential part of any meaningful concept of basic education; that, I believe, is a fundamental question of educational quality, from Kindergarten to university.

In addressing that question, I propose to talk neither about the fairly evident nor about the unfairly lunatic. An example of the evident is the perennial problem of a narrow existence, nicely expressed by a Canadian historian. "Americans," he said, "are benevolently ignorant about Canada, while Canadians are malevolently well-informed about the United States." Besides the obvious, there is the lunatic. Lunacy does happen here on earth and probably shouldn't be blamed on the moon, as those of you who speak Spanish, or English, know. An example of the lunatic is the Texas Representative who claims that, if we give foreign languages the same status as English, the Union of these United States will be split asunder by internal strife. To save the Union, send $20, or $50, or $100 or more today to ... [the address of the Texas Representative is then given].

More seriously, I want to indicate the essential value of the study of languages in reference to self-development and verbal development, the latter in the sense of knowledge about language itself, its possibilities and limitations.

Neighbors on Planet Earth. We generally look at the value of learning other languages in terms of understanding and communication with others in the world, with what Buckminster Fuller would call our fellow travellers on spaceship earth. Speaking of a "post-national world" 20 years ago, Northrup Frye offered a profound insight when he said: "Our neighbor is not necessarily the person in the same national, ethnic or economic group as we are, but one bonded to us by ties of intellect and imagination, of love and goodwill." So we probably owe it to ourselves as much as to our potential neighbors who happen to live in another part of the post-national world to learn other languages.

Knowledge and Being: We Are What We Know. In addition, our understanding of the world, of universe, determines who we are. We are what we know, and when our knowledge changes, so do we. What aspect of self-development is more profound than a solid and stable sense of being? On our way to developing a mature sense of self we break out of the narrow circles of self-centeredness and of the moment, reaching beyond ourselves in space and time. We reach beyond ourselves in time when we leave behind the prison of illiteracy and find what writers, past and present, have thought. Reading offers us the possibility of conversing with the best minds, bridging the flow of time.

Languages and World Views. We reach beyond ourselves in space when we leave behind the prison of a single-language perspective. Wilhelm von Humboldt observed keenly that "each language draws a magic circle around the people to which it belongs, a circle from which there is no escape except by stepping out of it into another." Humboldt evidently learned about much more than plants on his expedition to South America. The American linguist Benjamin Whorf, who studied the Hopi Indians and their language, found that Hopi verbs have no forms for past or future tense, only the present - consonant with the Hopi cosmological view of an all-pervasive present.[8] From his study of Hopi, Whorf concluded that our understanding of universe is as much conditioned by language as language is shaped by human experience. Every language, Whorf found, is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories of reasoning and communication.

Language as an instrument of cognition, as a means of knowing, experiencing, and communicating has inherent limitations - a truth that may provoke a crisis of communication and of creativity, as it did in the sensitive Austrian poet Hugo von Hoffmansthal in 1902. The American literary critic and humanist Walter Ong has asked: "How can we say that someone understands anything [more than superficially] when that person's register of experience consists of a narrow band of a single language?"[9]

Language and Self-Development. To understand and experience the world conveyed by our first language we must step outside

that language, beyond it to another language and world. Martin Heidegger believed it essential to transcend self-centeredness by standing outside the self - to see the self in a quasi-detached perspective. Learning a second language develops a second self that can look at the first self, the first language and the worldview they incorporate in a new, quasi-detached perspective.

A New Look at Language. This perspective gives insight into the nature of language itself, into its power to shape ideas and experience. Think for example about the different perception and experience of time in English and German formulations of the past: in the continuum of time extending from the present to the past, there is a much more immediate, closer-to-the-present sense in "Einstein hat die Relati itätstheorie entwickelt" than in "Einstein developed the theory of relativity." Or think of the acutely different perception of existence embodied in English "to be" and Spanish "ser" and "estar." We tend to explain to our students that "estar" implies a more temporary, "ser" a more permanent condition without reflecting on the duality of existence, sacred and profane, spiritual and material, expressed by two Spanish words that collapse into an undifferentiated one in English. Only in Spanish does the variation in the verb "to be" implicitly express, in a culturally determined linguistic structure, an oscillation in the sense of being between illusion and reality, between permanent and ephemerally time-bound values of human existence.

The point supports American translator Gregory Rabassa's

contention that one of the impossibilities of translation is the transfer of one cultural given to another culture.[10] Translation at best is an approximation, at worst a distortion. But working with two or more languages forces the closest possible reading of a text. The reader is challenged not only to find precise meanings, but also to deal with a degree of semantic imprecision that invites participation in the act of creating meaning.

Conclusion: The Challenge of Change

Imprecision and Mistaken Assumptions. We sometimes mistake imprecision for precision, particularly where we are dealing with the givens and assumptions of current points of view. In this exposition I have tried to do a close reading of a number of assumptions implicit in some of the issues of quantity and quality in language instruction.

Multipurpose Function of Language Instruction. Ultimately, the teaching of languages is multipurpose: for self-development; for knowledge about the connections between language, thinking, and experience; for knowledge and skills useful in the preparation for such worldly endeavors as international trade. There are immediate practical benefits, but there are lasting values as well that should give language study a place in the essential curriculum for every child.

An earlier version of these remarks was given as the luncheon

address of the conference "Issues for the 80's: New Goals, New Resources" at Sangamon State University, Springfield, Illinois, on October 3, 1987.

NOTES

1. See Hoegl, Juergen. "Education in the World System: The Demand for Language and International Proficiencies in Economic Development and National Security." Foreign Language Annals 19 (September 1986): 281-87 (see ED 266 677); and The Role of Foreign Languages in Developing the Resources of Illinois. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1984 (see ED 259 588 and ED 259 589).
2. See Illinois State Board of Education. Second Language and International Studies: Policy Study and Recommendations. Springfield: ISBE, 1986 (see ED 269 967).
3. See Laszlo, Ervin, et al. Goals for Mankind. New York: Dutton, 1977.
4. See Congressional Record, vol. 131, no.3 (January 21, 1985): S421-23.
5. The policy report defines "usable proficiency" as a level of proficiency sufficient to satisfy the requirements of everyday situations and routine school and work requirements, in reference to the ACTFL proficiency guidelines describing the "advanced" level.
6. See Goodlad, John. A Place Called School: Prospects for the

Future. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984.

7. See Illinois State Board of Education. High School and Beyond: An Overview of Illinois Students. Springfield: ISBE, 1981.
8. See Whorf, Benjamin. Language, Thought, and Reality. Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1974.
9. Ong, Walter. "The Human Nature of Professionalism." Presidential Address to the Modern Language Association, 1978.
10. See Rabassa, Gregory. "Translation and Its Possibilities." The American Scholar 44 (Winter 1974-75):29-39.